

Environmental Benefits and Concerns from Residential Landscapes

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A surprisingly high (80%) of U.S. households have access to a private lawn. Consumers annually spend around \$40 billion per year to maintain and improve their yards and the growth is accelerating as the U.S. population matures. Lawns, flower gardening, shrub care and general landscaping are important components of local economies. However, improper landscape design, plant selection and maintenance of our lawns and gardens can pollute our environment and waste precious water resources. Improperly applied pesticides and fertilizers often end up on impervious surfaces which are then washed into a nearby streams and add to problems such as eutrophication. Urban areas generate 9 times more runoff than a woodland area of the same size. Lawn grasses can require 2.5 to 4 times more water than trees and shrubs. Selecting appropriate plant varieties, landscape designs, and proper maintenance of turf areas can greatly reduce water use and pollution runoff. The 30 million acres of lawns constitute about 30% of the land area for urban and suburban communities.

The benefits of responsible landscaping practices are many and varied. A healthy and vigorous lawn traps pollution, prevents runoff, improves the air we breathe and can significantly increase property values. Gardening and yardwork contribute to healthy active living both physically and emotionally. Horticulture therapists have discovered that gardening provides a form of emotional expression and release, and it helps people connect with others. Contact with nature for typical urban dwellers is often limited to the patch of green that surrounds their homes. Studies of the effect on selling price of landscaping's "curbside appeal" show a positive impact on the order of 5 to 15 percent. Community landscaping is also important. Adjacent properties and the neighborhood may have an even greater impact on selling price than the property itself.

Residential landscapes also have important benefits to wildlife when plants are selected that provide cover, nesting sites, and food. Backyard wildlife watching is a very important activity in the U.S.. According to data from the Department of the Interior, observing, feeding or photographing wildlife was enjoyed by 66.1 million people in 2001. Among this group, 62.9 million stayed within a mile of their homes in order to participate in wildlife watching activities.

EPA has been participating in a coalition known as the "Lawns & the Environment Initiative" that works to educate and encourage the public to adopt responsible lawn and landscaping practices. These practices include appropriate use of chemicals, water, plant species, and other stewardship principles that will enhance the value and benefits of residential landscapes to homeowners, the community, and to wildlife and the environment. The coalition consists of stakeholders who sell landscaping products, government organizations that provide information and set environmental standards, and environmental advocacy nonprofit groups that promote backyard habitats and environmentally friendly landscapes. This poster will describe the activities of the Initiative and highlight some of the ways in which residential landscapes can be designed to provide more environmental and economic benefits.